



**“The Magician of Civilised Life”:
The Literary Detective in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Early Penny Fiction**

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Abstract

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s responses in her earliest novels to the mid-century city mysteries genre – an internationally popular form of penny fiction – allowed her to develop the detective genre in important ways. While attention to Braddon’s early work usually considers how it helped to establish the “sensation” fiction of the 1860s, this article examines how Braddon’s embrace of the earlier urban mysteries narrative both advanced the evolution of the *Mysteries* genre in the second half of the century and brought its maverick, socially marginal detective characters to new audiences. I argue that because of their roots in the penny *Mysteries*, Braddon’s detective characters act as agents of social equity rather than figures of surveillance, and they work to challenge many of the social hierarchies, stereotypes, and prejudices that form and undermine “civilised life,” often by magically dismantling or overcoming them.

Keywords

Braddon; urban mysteries; city mysteries; penny fiction; detective; social equity

Date of Acceptance: 31 December 2022

Date of Publication: 13 January 2023

Double Blind Peer Reviewed

Recommended Citation:

Hackenberg, Sara. 2022. “‘The Magician of Civilised Life’: The Literary Detective in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Early Penny Fiction.” *Victorian Popular Fictions*, 4.2: 63-79. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/RQQU4030>



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**“The Magician of Civilised Life”:
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Early Penny Fiction**

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“we come at last to look upon the detective police officer as the magician of civilised life”
(Braddon [1861-2] 1998: 219)

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Black Band; or, The Mysteries of Midnight*, which began serialisation in *The Halfpenny Journal, A Magazine for All Who Can Read* in July 1861, opens in the middle of a London masquerade ball held in the Drury Lane Theatre. This theatrical setting, along with a brief but pointed exchange between two masked revellers, immediately confirms the narrative’s genre. Among the many dramatically attired attendees, a man sporting the getup of a Greek brigand remarks to another man wearing a black velvet mask: “Colonel Bertrand, you are a mystery” (Braddon [1861-2] 1998: 5). “Young man,” replies Bertrand, who we soon learn is the leader of the international “Black Band” of master criminals:

great cities have their mysteries. I am one of the mysteries of great cities. Mention my name in London, Paris, Vienna, Rome, St. Petersburg, Constantinople, and they will tell you of my reckless expenditure, my horses, my carriages, my inexhaustible wealth, my fabulous generosity. Go a step farther, and ask them if they know the sources of that wealth, the secret of that luxury! They will shrug their shoulders, but they can tell you nothing.

(5-6)

With this exchange, Braddon succinctly encapsulates what the subtitle of her novel signals, that her readers should expect in the subsequent pages a narrative of city mysteries, an internationally popular form of mid-century penny fiction. Sparked by Eugène Sue’s radical *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–3), the novel of urban mysteries exploded across Europe and the Americas in the 1840s and 1850s, and hundreds of *Mysteries* novels were produced that focused on social inequity and other problems arising from urbanised capitalism. Urban *Mysteries* novels typically offer readers a theatrical array of master-perceiving, master-of-disguise characters, hailing from across the social spectrum, who are locked in thrilling conflicts that work to expose and challenge the economic inequities that underpin social stratification. Bertrand’s comment about the unknown sources of his “inexhaustible wealth”

directly references a common refrain of the urban *Mysteries*, that “enormous WEALTH is only enormous CRIME” (Lippard [1850] 1969: 30). The mid-century *Mysteries* novel delights both in showcasing criminals who gain enormous wealth as Bertrand does, literally by way of enormous crime, and in highlighting how the structural inequities of capitalism produce wealth that is almost always generated at the expense of others. They also regularly emphasise how the same wealth that bolsters the trappings of modern civilisation (technologies, luxuries) works to fortify modern crimes (fraud, con artistry). As G.W.M. Reynolds asserts in the opening of *The Mysteries of London* (1844), “there are but two words known in the moral alphabet of this great city; for all virtues are summed up in the one, and all vices in the other: and those words are WEALTH. | POVERTY” ([1844-6] 1846: I:2). The international *Mysteries* novel dissects in various ways how, under capitalism, wealth confers virtue to its holders, while poverty becomes synonymous with vice. The genre also gleefully upends such stereotypes: seeming gentlepeople (like Colonel Bertram) regularly turn out to be fraudsters and worse, while seeming criminals are often also righteous class warriors.

While the brief exchange between Braddon’s would-be Greek bravo and masked Colonel thus declares the genre of the novel at its outset, it also points to a central way in which Braddon works to transform the city *Mysteries* narrative, by personifying it in the figure of the most powerful plotter. Colonel Bertrand’s frank assertion that he himself is “one of the mysteries of great cities” makes him, right from the start, a kind of personification allegory of the genre in which he operates, in a move that begins to streamline the structure of mystery fiction. As Braddon (joining writers such as Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins) begins to consolidate the sprawling intrigues of the mid-century urban *Mysteries* narrative into the form of a single, extraordinary, master-plotting character, she concomitantly allows for a concentration and elevation of her narrative’s central detecting characters. *The Black Band* was one of three penny novels that Braddon wrote before her breakout hit *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). All three penny novels, *The Trail of the Serpent* (1861; first published as *Three Times Dead* in 1860), *The Black Band*, and *The Octoroon; or, the Lily of Louisiana* (1861–2), foreground personifications of the city *Mysteries* form in ways that help to develop the literary detective.¹ Braddon’s use of the urban *Mysteries* in her earliest penny fictions also fundamentally informs how in these fictions she imagines her detective characters as agents of social equity: as “magician[s] of civilised life” (Braddon [1861-2] 1998: 219) who challenge the social hierarchies, stereotypes, and prejudices that form and undermine “civilised life,” often by marvellously dismantling or overcoming them.

Attention to Braddon’s early work has largely considered how it helps to establish what was deemed sensation fiction in the 1860s. While the 1980s-90s saw some scholars, most influentially Ann Cvetkovich, examining Braddon’s contributions to detective fiction, these accounts begin with Robert Audley’s amateur detective work in *Lady Audley’s Secret*,

¹ Braddon also wrote two other novels before and during her writing of *Lady Audley’s Secret*: an elaborate lost-child melodrama titled *The Lady Lisle*, serialised in *The Welcome Guest* from May to September 1861, and a historical romance titled *The Captain of the Vulture*, serialised in *The Sixpenny Magazine* from September 1861 to March 1862. These novels were aimed at middle-class readerships and differ from Braddon’s early penny fictions by engaging less directly with the urban *Mysteries* genre and by not featuring detective characters. Braddon, however, slyly references earlier penny fiction in these novels too: for instance, the villain of *The Lady Lisle* is named Varney, and his wife is called Ada, in echo of James Malcolm Rymer’s extremely popular 1840s penny bloods *Varney, the Vampyre* (1844–6) and *Ada the Betrayed* (1842–3), while *The Captain* features two cousins named Markham who follow different paths of virtue and vice in London, in seeming homage to G.W.M. Reynolds’s virtuous and vicious Markham brothers, who provide the frame for the first series of *The Mysteries of London* (1844–6).

the novel that established Braddon as a writer of sensation fiction.² Critical assessment of Robert Audley as an important early detective character has expanded in recent decades to include many of Braddon's other amateur sleuths (especially Eleanor Vane of *Eleanor's Victory* [1863]), and, since the 2003 Modern Library edition of *The Trail of the Serpent*, attention to Braddon's professional officers (such as late-century police detective John Faunce, featured in *Rough Justice* [1898] and *His Darling Sin* [1899]) has also included her very first detective character, policeman Joseph Peters. Braddon's other early detectives, however, have been neglected. As Jennifer Phegley has recently noted, "little attention has been paid" to the penny press novels that Braddon wrote while starting her professional and personal partnership with John Maxwell (2022: 11). Even scholarship on Braddon that specifically focuses on her mystery fiction tends to overlook her early penny novels. Lucy Sussex's important *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction: The Mothers of the Mystery Genre* (2010), briefly discusses *The Trail of the Serpent* but leaves out *The Black Band* and *The Octoroon*. Likewise, while Saverio Tomaiuolo offers a reading of *The Trail of the Serpent* in his *In Lady Audley's Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Genres* (2010), he omits *The Octoroon* and mentions *The Black Band* only in passing as an "unofficial serial publication" (2010: 160). Anne-Marie Beller's *Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* (2012) includes entries on both *The Black Band* and *The Octoroon* but does not mention either novel's detective characters (2012: 42, 122).

This article seeks to reappraise Braddon's earliest penny fictions by turning to how they respond to the urban *Mysteries* of the 1840s and 1850s in ways that both helped to evolve the *Mysteries* genre and to bring its maverick, socially marginal detective characters to new audiences. Braddon's first three penny fictions offer important professional and amateur detective characters – especially mute (though not deaf) police officer Joseph Peters in *The Trail of the Serpent*; shabby, aged clerk Joshua Slythe in *The Black Band*; and conniving, impoverished governess Pauline Corsi in *The Octoroon* – which, taken together, help us to construct a more comprehensive account of the evolution of the literary detective. Most considerations of the literary detective begin with Edgar Allan Poe's 1840s tales featuring amateur sleuth C. Auguste Dupin before moving to later sensation fictions (especially Collins's *The Moonstone* [1868]). Poe, however, like Braddon, was deeply influenced by the extraordinarily popular mid-century *Mysteries*, and he too experimented with streamlining their serialised excesses (for instance, by offering Dupin's urban adventures in a taut three-part story sequence). Detective characters such as Braddon's Peters, Slythe, and Corsi, who clearly display the social radicalism of city *Mysteries* fiction, can help illuminate not only how earlier detectives like Dupin also trade in urban *Mysteries* conventions, but also how they too are subtly radical. Indeed, Braddon's forthright engagement with the urban *Mysteries* in her early work allows us to see better the ways in which the early fictional detective is, in general, a socially radical figure rather than a figure of discipline and surveillance.

Braddon's first detective character, Joseph Peters, also joins Poe's Dupin in highlighting the mysteries of literal reading – offering meditations on how to navigate tricky signs, in ways that foster literacy and other empowering social skills, such as mind reading and the ability to question stereotypes. In what follows, I will consider the contest between the personified *Mysteries* character and rising detective Peters in Braddon's first novel, *The Trail of the Serpent*, before gesturing more briefly to how Braddon offers a similar

² Before Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings* (1992), Jeanne Bedell explored "Amateur and Professional Detectives in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon" in a 1983 *Clues* article; like Cvetkovich, Bedell uses *Lady Audley's Secret* as a starting point.

dynamic in *The Black Band* and *The Octoroon*. In each case, I trace how Braddon's detective "magicians," in besting or eclipsing personified *Mysteries* master-plotters, enlarge the detective character and help to level social stratification in their novels, in ways that work to reform and contribute to "civilised life."

The "Good Schoolmaster" vs. Joseph Peters

Near the end of *The Trail of the Serpent*, just after the surprise appearance of an eyewitness who will aid detective Joseph Peters (and the Bohemian group of men known as the "Cheerful Cherokees" who are assisting him) in proving the identity of the villainous master-plotter of the novel, a precarious bookshelf is upended on one of the Cherokees' heads.³ Engulfed by a "literary shower-bath," he becomes immersed in "the most fascinating *olla podrida* of literature, wherein the writings of Charles Dickens, George Sand, Harrison Ainsworth, and Alexandre Dumas are blended together in the most delicious and exciting confusion" (302-3). Such a spicy literary stew ("*olla podrida*") describes Braddon's novel as a whole. As she presents her first version of a *Mysteries* personification who is challenged by a primary detective character, Braddon deliciously blends together elements of many popular urban *Mysteries* novels (including Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* [1842-3], Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* [1844-6], Ainsworth's *Revelations of London* [1844], Dickens's *Bleak House* [1852-3], Dumas's *The Mohicans of Paris* [1856], and more) to offer her readers a kind of genealogy of popular mystery.

Braddon's *olla podrida* can be seen in nearly every element of her novel. She borrows directly from *Bleak House*, opening *The Trail of the Serpent*, just like Dickens's novel, in implacable November weather (although in the fictional manufacturing town of "Slopperton" rather than in London); the gloom in Slopperton is "darkest, foggiest, wettest, and windiest" outside the town "on the open road" (rather than, as Dickens has it, at the heart of the town and its corrupt institutions), where a prodigal son, one Richard Marwood, is wending his way home (Braddon [1861] 2003: 10). Richard soon reunites with his mother and his uncle, Montague Harding (the names are a potpourri of Dickens's Richard Carstone and G. W. M. Reynolds's heroic Richard Markham and antiheroic Montague Greenwood). Mr. Harding, a wealthy man recently returned from India, convinces Richard at the end of their celebratory evening to take a gift of money and set out bright and early to make his honourable way in the world. The next morning, however, just as Richard is back on the road, he is apprehended for Mr. Harding's murder. While circumstantial evidence points the police directly to Richard, the novel's narrator points us to Jabez North, a former pauper child who, after being thrown as a baby into Slopperton's river, the Slosby, was rescued by the city and is now a "good schoolmaster" at a local academy. We immediately see however that, in direct echo of Eugène Sue's nefarious "Schoolmaster" villain in *The Mysteries of Paris*, this schoolmaster is *not* good. As we watch him return to his school on the opening stormy night, blood on his hands, and then chillingly

³ In this essay I cite from *The Trail of the Serpent*, the 1861 rewrite of Braddon's first novel *Three Times Dead; Or, The Secret of the Heath*, originally published in 1860. *The Trail of the Serpent* was re-serialized in the *Halfpenny Journal* from 1 August 1864 to 28 February 1865 and subsequently reprinted several times. Braddon's revisions notably expanded the novel and changed several of her original character names: for instance, in *Three Times Dead*, the central detective Joseph Peters is named Joseph Waters in apparent homage to William Russell, who used the pen name "Waters" in his 1856 *Recollections of a Detective-Police Officer*.

hasten the death of a sick student, the only witness to his return, we recognise Jabez as a formidable villain who, like George Thompson's Dead Man in *City Crimes* (1849), was abused and scorned as a pauper child in a way that develops his master-plotting drive (7, 9).⁴ When we learn the next day, during an interview Jabez has with his former lover in which he repudiates her and their baby, that he had "thought to have been richer to-day ... but [he has] had a disappointment," we are reasonably sure that he has murdered Mr. Harding for his money (which, of course, was already given to Richard), and also that Jabez is just the type of *Mysteries* plotter who will soon conceive of another scheme to "build [his] fortune in days to come" (37).

Jabez, however, does not actually devise his own new intrigue: instead, he simply borrows from Count Fosco's plotting in Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60). In Book Two of the novel he ventures into a slum called Blind Peter – Slopperton's version of Dickens's Tom-all-Alone's rookery, which Braddon winks at us "looked very much like a London alley which had been removed from its site and pitched haphazard on to a Slopperton mountain" (75) – and comes across his own sickly doppelgänger (who, we soon learn, is actually his biological twin Jim).⁵ Although Jabez is told by his newly discovered biological grandmother that she knows a "Golden Secret" about him "worth a mint of money," he does not pursue it; instead he seizes on the fortuitous replication of his image, and hatches a plan to get away with stealing from his employer by staging Jim's corpse as his own. Having used Jim to kill off his Slopperton identity, he brings his stolen riches to Paris, where he significantly expands his *Mysteries* stratagems. At the start of Book Three, we reencounter him as one "Raymond Marolles," augmenting his master perception with "the value of an opera-glass" during an evening performance as he sets his sights on a beautiful Spanish American heiress, Valerie de Cevennes (119). Masterfully tricking Valerie into giving her opera singer lover Gaston de Lancy poison – he stages an elaborate performance that convinces her Gaston is unfaithful – he then blackmails the lady into marrying him. Halfway through the novel, by the start of the fourth book, eight years have passed since the corpse that looked like Jabez North was found on a hillock outside of Slopperton, and Raymond Morales, as an ever-conniving, fabulously wealthy, internationally operating aristocrat-banker Count, has become a full personification of the *Mysteries* master-plotting energies.

Braddon, however, has already planted the seeds of her *Mysteries* personification's comeuppance in the very character who discovers Jabez's supposed corpse in Book Two: up-and-coming detective Joseph Peters. Peters enters the novel as a lowly deputy, a "mere scrub, one of the very lowest of the police-force, a sort of outsider and *employé* of Mr. Jinks, the Gardenford detective"; indeed, he is initially so minor as to not even be given a name (29). As he assists Mr. Jinks in apprehending Richard, however, he is given a rather lengthy description, one that minutely details his utter inconspicuousness:

⁴ Andrew Mangham, who recognises *The Trail of the Serpent* as "an important book" both literarily and culturally, notes that Edward Bulwer Lytton's "taste for poisonings" may have influenced Braddon to feature poisonings and "strange and unnerving chemists" in her first work (Mangham 2013: 95). The urban *Mysteries* also regularly feature miraculous chemists with the ability to drug characters into animated suspension and to bring the (seeming) dead back to life.

⁵ Braddon's name for her version of Tom-all-Alone's nicely encapsulates the blindness of those who refuse to see the poverty right in front of them.

Mr. Jinks's quiet friend was exactly one of those people adapted to pass in a crowd. He might have passed in a hundred crowds, and no one of the hundreds of people in any of those hundred crowds would have glanced aside to look at him. You could only describe him by negatives. He was neither very tall nor very short, he was neither very stout nor very thin, neither dark nor fair, neither ugly nor handsome; but just such a medium between the two extremities of each as to be utterly commonplace and unnoticeable. If you looked at his face for three hours together, you would in those three hours find only one thing in that face that was any way out of the common – that one thing was the expression of the mouth. It was a compressed mouth with thin lips, which tightened and drew themselves rigidly together when the man thought – and the man was almost always thinking: and this was not all, for when he thought most deeply the mouth shifted in a palpable degree to the left side of his face. This was the only thing remarkable about the man, except, indeed, that he was dumb but not deaf, having lost the use of his speech during a terrible illness which he had suffered in his youth.

(28-9)

Peters here is a kind of Everyman, an absolute average who can blend seamlessly into “a hundred crowds.” Indeed, he is remarkable only for his compressed mouth and his mutism – the disability which has caused the police force to overlook his talents (his “infirmity, they say, makes him scarcely worth his salt, though they admit that his industry is unfailing”) (45). While his professional colleagues initially value him only because of his closed mouth, thinking that at least he can “be relied on because he could not talk,” we soon learn that “he *could* talk though, in his own way ... with his fingers” (29, emphasis mine). “These fingers,” the narrator notes, “were more active than clean, and made rather a dirty alphabet” (29). Dirty though they might be, Peter's digital signing provides Braddon with an excellent way to allegorise how detectives are always writerly readers: detectives, just like readers, encounter discourse (for the detective, clues; for the reader, the words on the page), and both must actively construct from this discourse the story of what has happened and is happening.⁶ Peters's communications emphasise how readers of mysteries must read especially actively: Peters *literally* spells out his own readings of clues and observations with his fingers to characters, who must – just like the readers of the novel – literally piece together his digital retelling of past and current events.

Braddon repeatedly puts scenes of active, literal reading in front of us by way of the dumb detective's communications, as we watch characters “watching his fingers with breathless attention” (245). Our first example of this kind of reading spectacle occurs shortly after we meet Peters, when he shows he can mind read Richard far better than can Mr. Jinks and thus immediately discerns Richard's innocence. As he begins to talk “in his own way to Mr. Jinks,” Richard “watche[s] the dirty alphabet” too (for “Richard knew this dumb alphabet,” having used sign language in an early flirtation):

First, two grimy fingers laid flat upon the dirty palm, N. Next, the tip of the grimy forefinger of the right hand upon the tip of the grimy third finger of the left hand, O; the next letter is T, and the man snaps his fingers – the word is finished, NOT. Not what? Richard found himself wondering with an intense eagerness, which, even in the bewildered state of his mind, surprised him. The dumb man began another word – G – U – I – L –

(29-30)

⁶ Noting that detective fiction always comprises two stories, that of the crime and that of the investigation that reconstructs the crime, Tsvetan Todorov suggests that these two stories stage the “two aspects of every literary work which the Russian Formalists isolated forty years ago” – that is, the *fabula* (“the story of what has happened”) and the *syuzhet* (the discourse; “the way the author presents it to us”) (1997: 45). The detective's reconstruction of the plot (*fabula*, or story) of what has happened from these signifiers – from clues and traces – allegorises the reader's process.

Richard's intense eagerness to read the dumb detective's written speech is shared by nearly everyone inside (and outside) the novel, in ways that occasionally provide almost crossword-type puzzles for readers to complete: as, for instance, when we see at Richard's trial at the end of Book One "the fingers of Mr. Peters slowly shaping seven letters – two words – four letters in the first word, and three letters in the second" (56). Following the shaping of these letters, Richard starts acting strangely and suddenly addresses the court in the character of Napoleon; as a result (to the general surprise of those present) he is found "not guilty, on the ground of insanity" and sent to an asylum instead of to his death (67). Whatever four- and three-letter words the reader comes up with to account for this plot twist, however, it takes nearly two hundred pages to get confirmation (at the end of Book Four) that they were "sham mad" – something we learn during yet another scene of "earnest eyes fixed on the active fingers of the detective" in a "silence only broken by some exclamation" at particularly exciting moments (249, 242).

In this quiet but exciting reading scene in Book Four, Peters gives Richard – who finally has been sprung from the asylum by Peters and his "Cheerful Cherokee" friend Gus – a masterful detective recapitulation of how he was able initially to read Richard's innocence (by paying close attention to his face and his reactions), and also of his suspicions of Jabez North, who (as Peters thinks) is now deceased. That such detective retelling is always a writerly act is underlined not just by his audience's breathless focus on his digital letters but also by the detective's idiosyncratic spelling – his "fancy style of orthography," in which he adds and subtracts letters from words "as his taste dictates" (242). Peters's quirky spelling at once highlights his writerly form of communication and also has the effect of making his words seem more like accented speech (as when he drops a "final g off some words to clap it onto others") or gain emphasis, as when he refers to his profession as "Detective," "embellishing the word with an extraneous *k*" (242, 49). Peters lengthens "[d]etective" in this way early in the novel while signing to Kuppins, a maidservant in his new rooming house in Slooperton, about his intention to adopt a "fondling, to be brought up by hand" – a "fondling," it turns out, who is none other than the baby Jabez repudiated when he was so disappointed the day after Mr. Harding's murder (46).⁷ While Jabez's former lover has killed herself by throwing herself into the Slosby, the baby, just like his father before him, has been rescued, but instead of growing up in the poor house, this baby is adopted by Peters, who has decided he would like to "'ederkate,' – he is some time deciding on the conflicting merits of a *c* or a *k* for this word – he shall 'ederkate the fondling, and bring him up to his own business ... [of] detective'" (49).

Much is made in the novel of Peters's "philanthrop[y]" in moving to Slooperton and adopting the baby, whom he names Slosby after the river, though the novel also makes clear that this act is both humanitarian *and* made in the service of the detective's professional ambitions. The detective's career advances after his move: his marvellous "tact" sees him "triumphing so completely over the difficulties he labours under from his infirmity, as to have won for himself

⁷ Kuppins, like Richard, "understood the dumb alphabet" and was "adept in the art of construing this manual language" (47). While both characters' literacies in the manual language are chalked up to former "love-passages" in which they found signing helpful – thus showing how Braddon links advanced literacy with care for others, as Gus also easily learns it while helping Peters rescue Richard – they also join a surprising number of characters in the novel who can read Peters's hands. As Christine Ferguson notes, the "ubiquity" of such literacy "among the hearing and speaking citizens of Slooperton might seem surprising or downright unconvincing" (2008: 10). Ferguson, however, resists the idea that Braddon is being "dangerous and arguably irresponsible" in her "minimization of the real difficulties which Deaf sign language users face in a heavily aural and oral society," instead exploring how Braddon, with Peters's dirty alphabet, makes "the material nature of language blatant" (12).

a better place in the police force of Slopperton – and of course a better salary” (43, 102). Slosh’s babyhood, however, is generally a time of slow business, and “Mr. Joseph Peters,” the narrator tells us, “who is ambitious” but “has found no proper field for his abilities as yet,” regularly grouches (sounding rather like a reader of sensational mystery fiction) that he “should like an iron-safe case, a regular out-and-out burglary ... or a good forgery ... or a bit of bigamy; that would be something new,” as baby Slosh screams in the background (102). Slosh’s screams prompt Peters to reflect that “if that there little ‘un was growed up ... his lungs might be a fortune to me,” and to acknowledge “Lord ... I don’t look upon that hinfant as a hinfant. I looks upon him as a voice,” a comment Christine Ferguson reads as revealing Peters’ view of Slosh “not just as a son but also as a useful prosthesis” (Braddon [1861] 2003: 102; Ferguson 2008: 14). Indeed, Peters’s care for Slosh is both paternal and a means of bodily extension and aid, though not just for his own body, but also the body of his profession. “I’m rather soft-hearted on the subject of babies,” he later tells Richard, “and often had a thought that I should like to try the power of cultivation in the way of business, and bring a child up from the very cradle to the police detective line, to see whether I couldn’t make that ‘ere child an ornament to the force” (Braddon [1860] 2003: 247). By the time Slosh is eight years old, he functions both as a voice for Peters and as a small-scale model of professional detection: Peters calls him a “pocket edition of all the sharpness as ever knives was nothing to,” and, as the boy helps to rescue Richard from the asylum, Richard marvels that Slosh is like “some great strong man [that] had been reduced into the compass of a little boy, in order to make him sharper, as cooks boil down a gallon of gravy to a pint in the manufacture of strong soup” (199).

The novel is at pains to point out that Slosh’s concentrated “pocket edition” sharpness is a result both of Mr. Peters’s cultivation and of his status as scion of the novel’s *Mysteries* master-plotter personification. When Slosh first sets eyes on his biological father, their resemblance is obvious. This moment occurs when Peters and Slosh are in London and come across Jabez in the guise of a foreign Count: suddenly realising that it was *not* in fact Jabez he had found dead on the hillock outside of Slopperton, the detective asks Slosh what he thinks of him. When Slosh approves of the man’s appearance, Peters rapidly signs: “I’m glad you think him han’some, Slosh ... In fact, I’m glad he meets your views as far as personal appearance goes, because, between you and me, Slosh, that man’s your father” (266). While this revelation momentarily “takes the breath” out of Slosh (as indeed, Braddon’s narrator notes, it would be enough to “take the breath out of any boy, however preternaturally elderly and superhumanly sharp” he might be), Slosh recovers quickly and coolly reassures Peters that this will not interfere with his helping to apprehend the man. Peters, marvelling at his adopted son’s *sang froid*, ascribes it to biology: “chips of old blocks is of the same wood, and it’s only reasonable there should be a similarity in the grain,” he thinks (267). Musing that “I thought I’d make him a genius, but I didn’t know there was such a under-current of his father,” Peters happily concludes: “it’ll make him the glory of his profession” (267). Braddon suggests here that Slosh’s imminent detective genius arises from his familial connections to a master schemer who embodies the plotting energy of the urban *Mysteries* as well as from the training and care of the master-plotter’s rising detective challenger.

In these moments, we see the full scope of Braddon’s genealogy: her plot literalises the kinship between forms of mystery, casting the detective story’s rise and eclipse of the sprawling mid-century *Mysteries* as simply a kind of concentration of the mystery genre at large. The palimpsestic textuality operating on every level of Braddon’s novel reinforces her allegorical genealogy. The *olla podrida* of her promiscuous literary references, Peters’s writerly fingers, and the many references to textual materiality sprinkled throughout the narrative all show how Braddon weaves her mystery so as constantly to call attention to the

literal act of reading. Not only is Slosh a “pocket edition” of sharpness, but Peters’s exclamation, when he sets eyes on Marolles and recognises Jabez, references another kind of book: “There’s mysterious goin’s on, and some coincidences in this life, as well as in your story-books that’s lent out at three half-pence a volume, keep ’em three days and return ’em clean” (303). The three-volume novel is also referenced when the “golden secret” that Jabez’s grandmother knows is finally revealed: that (in a spectacular redundancy of coincidence) Jabez’s father and Valerie’s guardian uncle, the Marquis de Cevennes, are one and the same person. In this moment, as Jabez confronts his father, the Marquis handily dismisses him with “his own weapons” of languid *sang froid*, remarking that “all this” is “almost as bad as the third volume of a fashionable novel,” being “so intolerably melodramatic” (328). In the end, after Peters finally apprehends Jabez (just as Jabez is attempting to rehash the shamming of his own death from Book One by trying to escape in a coffin), and the villain subsequently suicides (dying a third and final time), he persists as a textualised spectacle. The Good Schoolmaster of Slopperton becomes a waxwork in a Chamber of Horrors, where he “was considered well worth the extra sixpence for admission,” and is also performed in “a melodrama in four periods” by one of the Cheerful Cherokees, where “the Count was represented as living *en permanence* in Hessian boots with gold tassels” (396-7).

While *The Trail of the Serpent* thus continually reminds that we are wandering in a delectable textual labyrinth, it does so in a way that offers real lessons about how better to read signs and to read each other – especially cautioning about the dangers of relying upon stereotypes. As Sarah Waters notes, the novel’s highly “self-reflexive preoccupation with theatrical and literary code” works to “nudge Braddon’s readers into an awareness of themselves *as* readers,” as “equal players with the characters,” alongside whom we learn about “the slipperiness of signs” (Braddon [1861] 2003: xix-xxi). We learn, as another character insists, that words in books “do not err: they only want to be interpreted rightly;” that errors in reading words, as in reading people, occur from our own “ignorance” and “powerlessness to read ... aright” (275).⁸ For instance, Jabez North’s initial, fatal reading error is to read working-class, disabled Peters as insignificant, which allows Peters to overhear, the day after the murder, the villain’s discussion with his former lover. As the detective explains to Richard, “I signified to him that I was dumb, and he took it for granted that I was deaf as well – which was one of those stupid mistakes your clever chaps sometimes fall into – so he went on a-talking” (245-6). Instead of making hasty, dismissive assumptions about the people we encounter, Peters throughout maintains, we should pay close attention to what is in front of us and learn to identify *with* others, in order to better perceive what connects people and clues. As Peters explains, “what a detective officer’s good at, if he’s worth his salt, is this ’ere: when he sees two here and another two there, he can put ’em together, though they might be a mile apart to anybody not up to the trade, and make ’em into four” (243). At the end of *The Trail of the Serpent*, Peters is an independently wealthy man, having had a hundred pounds a year settled on him by Richard’s grateful mother, and he decides to focus entirely on Slosh: “I think,” he tells Richard “on his fingers, ‘I shall marry Kuppins, and give my mind to the education of the fondling ... [who will] be a great man’” (404). By doing so, Peters indicates how he is going to continue his marvellous work in challenging social stratification.

⁸ This statement is uttered by master chemist and tarot card reader M. Blurosset, a character who, thankfully, did not supply Valerie with fatal poison, but rather with an experimental concoction of his own that only counterfeits death. After Valerie doses Gaston de Lancy with the concoction, Blurosset keeps him alive, and Gaston and Valerie are reunited at the end of the novel. Valerie, who is often described in ways that echo *Bleak House*’s Lady Dedlock, thus gets the happy ending denied to Dickens’s character.

Not only has Peters managed to move himself from being a dismissed disabled person (one of the very lowest of the police force, a mere scrub, a sort of outsider) into a position of social authority, but he is actively raising the rejected and abandoned Slosh to become a “great man” by way of detective efforts. Any reader, Braddon implies, might also be able to join in this greatness, by learning to read like a detective.

Colonel Bertrand vs. Joshua Slythe, and Pauline Corsi vs. Pauline Corsi

Braddon’s next two penny novels follow the pattern set by *The Trail of the Serpent*, in which the modern city’s mysteries are consolidated into the figure of a primary master-plotter in a way that also elevates a central detecting character. As earlier discussed, Braddon’s most overt urban *Mysteries* narrative, *The Black Band; or, The Mysteries of Midnight*, immediately tries to contain the city-mystery genre’s complex plotting by personifying it in the figure of the Black Band’s ringleader, Colonel Oscar Bertrand. Bertrand, as he provides the nucleus of the novel-at-large, is sought by many professional and amateur detectives across the narrative, but Braddon gradually focuses on aged law clerk Joshua Slythe, who outperforms all the others by successfully infiltrating, in a way that subsequently breaks up, the Brotherhood of the Black Band. Braddon’s third novel, *The Octoroon; or, the Lily of Louisiana*, which was offered (as the title announces) as a version of an American tragic octoroon story (it was written to coincide with the 1861 London debut of Dion Boucicault’s popular melodrama *The Octoroon, or Life in Louisiana*), ends up simply grafting its octoroon story onto a *Mysteries* narrative. In *The Octoroon*, the most overt personification of the *Mysteries* novel’s complex plotting, governess Pauline Corsi, is – in a twist – also the character who becomes the narrative’s most powerful detective. As Corsi resolves most of the novel’s mysteries, she also significantly works to dismantle the “tragic” elements of the tragic octoroon trope.

The Black Band follows the *Mysteries* form by offering readers an unruly, proliferating host of master-perceiving masters of disguise – even as it also tries to contain them. The novel’s host of sharp, deceiving perceivers include Bertrand and his many agents (Samuel Crank, Edith Vandeleur, Rosine Rousel), as well as those determined to penetrate the Band’s operations (professional police detectives Inspector Martin and Sergeant Boulder, self-made mechanic millionaire Robert Merton, Spanish dancer Lolota Vizzini, playwright Antony Verner, valet Nicholas, clerk Joshua Slythe, and even a member of a rival secret society, Antonio Vecchi of the Italian “Good Cousins”).⁹ Vecchi’s character points to other ways the novel follows famous urban *Mysteries* and *Mysteries*-inspired narratives, especially Reynolds’s *The Mysteries of London* and Collins’s *The Woman in White*, by weaving into the mix a plot about Italian freedom fighting and a Carbonari-type association.

As it happens, it is an attack by the Black Band on the Italian freedom fighter “Prince de Z –” (heralded as “foremost in the ranks of patriots, of whom Mazzini was then the chief”) that brings working-class police officers Inspector Martin and Sergeant Boulder into the novel, the detectives who are explicitly lauded as the “magicians of civilised life” (Braddon [1861-2] 1998: 177, 219). These police detectives are from the start seen as figures who can upend social hierarchies: as Signor Marelli aids the duped Prince by calling in the detectives, he remarks,

⁹ Many of the master-perceiving masters of disguise in *The Black Band* also echo famous earlier urban *Mysteries* characters. Clever dancer Lolota Vizzini, for instance, who lives on “Arlington Street,” is a version of G. W. M. Reynolds’s powerful courtesan character Diana Arlington from *The Mysteries of London*, while self-made gentleman mechanic Richard Merton shares the initials of both Reynolds’s Richard Markham and Braddon’s own Richard Marwood.

“I may keep a Duke waiting, but the time of Inspector Martin is too valuable to be trifled with” (197). Other master perceivers of the novel also work to challenge and overcome social stratification: Lolota Vizzini protects and cares for fallen and friendless young women; Merton’s “labours were in the noble field of political economy; his studies were devoted to the amelioration of poverty, the suppression of crime, the improvement of society, the education of the ignorant, the elevation of the fallen” (319); and Nicholas the valet shows how servants and other working characters can rise through their detective energy (as Inspector Martin admiringly remarks, upon hearing one of Nicholas’s feats of recognition, that “that young man ought to be educated for the detective force ... he’s got a very pretty talent” [205]).

As Martin and Joseph Boulder work on the Prince de Z –’s case, they note the impenetrability of the Black Band: “it’s my belief,” Martin proclaims, that “there’s a company” of thieves “so organised as to defy detection,” and he and Boulder agree that their “honour as a detective officer is concerned in unearthing them” (199-200). Indeed, the Band is tricky enough, and their main underground lair is disguised well enough, to confuse temporarily even Oscar Bertrand himself (as he looks for it at one point he mutters “Strange ... often as I have been here, I always forget the way to the wretched place,” and once he finds it, he exults “I would defy all the detectives in England to find us here” [62]). Despite the police detectives’ fervour to unearth the Black Band, however, it is finally “amateur detective” Slythe, with his “peculiar and almost miraculous talents,” who succeeds in penetrating the criminal organisation (296). Slythe, a “confidential clerk” who works on his lawyer employer’s “dark cases,” begins this process with a clever disguise that gains him entry at a lunatic asylum run by the Band (where he handily rescues a character who has been abducted and imprisoned there) (278). Next, he intervenes in and scuppers one of the Band’s poisoning schemes (which he discovers by ingeniously using “gutta percha tubing” to hear through walls). Upon this achievement, the man he has aided attests to his powers, exclaiming “Merciful powers! ... what an extraordinary being you are” as “piece by piece you unroll an intricate scheme of villainy, which I could never have unraveled” (397). Finally, he discovers the Band’s underground lair (partly by drawing on information from Martin and Boulder), where he is magically able to pass as a member of the Band and to learn the secrets of the Band’s many “passages, cut through the cellarage of numerous houses ... [that] communicated with gratings opening into different dark alleys, such as exist in the city of London,” which facilitate the Band’s many daring burglaries (565). Although upon Slythe’s disclosures Bertrand manages to escape to Italy (where, like Collins’s Count Fosco before him, his plotting is cut short by the Italian secret society he has tried to con),¹⁰ the Brotherhood of the Black Band is broken up by Slythe’s efforts.

Such efforts again work to level social inequalities. Sir Arthur Beaumorris, one of the characters saved from the Band by Slythe’s skill, insists to Slythe that “all differences in rank should be forgotten”: “pray do not talk to me of inequality, my dear Slythe,” he exclaims, “for remember that if there is any inequality between us, it is you who have all the advantage, for we are indebted to you for obligations which nothing can repay” (577). Slythe declines Beaumorris’s offer to live with him in Castle Beaumorris, and also rejects the suggestion that he might retire as a gentleman (“No, Sir Arthur, no; I feel the kindness and I appreciate it, believe me; but, no, that sort of life was never made for me,” he declares,

¹⁰ This is not the Good Cousins but rather the freedom-seeking Mountaineers, and instead of simply murdering Bertrand (as Fosco’s betrayed society did), they feed him a complex poison that destroys his brain and thus his ability to plot. This variation, of course, leaves Bertrand alive and thus available for resurrection, and indeed Braddon brings him back in a sequel, *Oscar Bertrand; or, The Idiot of the Mountain* (1863–4).

proclaiming “I was never meant to be a gentleman ... I was made to be what I am – a sly old dog, a cunning old fox, but useful in my way, you know, useful in my way” [577]). However, he remains at the forefront of the action as the novel ends, working authoritatively side-by-side with Martin and Boulder “to unravel the mysteries of that extraordinary band of criminals” that he was marvellously able to take down (600).

In *The Octoroon*, just as in *The Black Band*, nearly all the wealth in the novel is the result of great crime. Almost every wealth-holder in the narrative has gained their riches through slavery, privateering, or other “dark and secret” transactions. Indeed, Braddon explicitly notes how “most of the wealthiest men in New Orleans” make use of corrupt lawyer Silas Craig, who (like Thomas Frost’s Mr. Ashley and Dickens’s Mr. Tulkinghorn, among others) is a version of Eugène Sue’s villainous notary Jacques Ferrand from *Les Mystères de Paris*:

Silas was a master in the evil arts of chicanery; a useful lawyer for all business, but above all useful in such affairs that were of too dark and secret a nature to bear exposure to the light of day. He was the attorney employed by Augustus Horton, by Don Juan Moraquitos, and by most of the wealthiest men in the city of New Orleans; men who affected ignorance of his character, because his style of doing business suited their purpose.

(Braddon [1861-2] n.d.: 65-6)

The introduction of Silas Craig in the second and third instalments, as the secret owner of an infamous New Orleans gambling den (one almost as full of mysteries, murders, and secret egresses as George Lippard’s Monk Hall in his 1844 Philadelphia *Mysteries* novel *The Quaker City*) – moves the novel firmly into *Mysteries* mode, despite its *Octoroon* title. However, by the fifth instalment we have learned that Silas is not just a corrupt lawyer, but also an enslaver, and thus he brings together the narrative’s two core generic forms. Indeed, by locating Silas Craig’s gambling den on “Columbia Street,” Braddon indicates how his various endeavours assemble a microcosm of America’s mysteries and crimes at large (69).¹¹ By just over a third of the way into the novel, in which many other characters, including mysterious French governess Pauline Corsi, have been introduced, it has become clear that *The Octoroon* is primarily a *Mysteries* narrative, albeit one that makes especially explicit how slavery exacerbates global economic and social inequity.

Braddon’s linking of slavery to the urban mysteries is not unusual: not only does Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* contain a subplot about American slavery, but many American *Mysteries* novels reference slavery, including several that, like *The Octoroon*, are set in New Orleans: for instance, in Baron von Reisenstein’s 1854–5 German-language *Die Geheimnisse von New Orleans*, or *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, much of the master-plotting aims to produce an American version of the historical Haitian rebel Toussaint Louverture to abolish slavery. Kimberly Manganelli, in her reading of *The Octoroon*, argues that “American abolitionist fiction gave rise to British sensation fiction,” and notes briefly that “racial generation literature ... was read alongside the city mystery romances of George Lippard, George Thompson” (138). Such connections can be seen from the start of *The Octoroon*. Although Braddon begins her novel as a straightforward octoroon story, she immediately references a trope that is regularly seen in both *Mysteries* and tragic octoroon narratives: the mysterious mark of Cain. In the opening scene, Mortimer Percy, the son of a wealthy

¹¹ In this essay, I cite from the American edition of *The Octoroon*, which differs from the British edition in just one significant way: it eliminates a chapter titled “The Lawyer’s Map of the United States,” which makes the connection between Columbia (America) and Craig’s gambling den especially explicit ([1861-2] 1999: 42-3).

American South enslaver who is travelling in London, recognises the enigmatic yet “fatal signs” of mixed-race identity in white heiress Cora Leslie, who has been educated in England but has determined to return to her father’s New Orleans plantation (6). No one else in London can see these signs – not even Mortimer’s cousin Adelaide, Cora’s long-time bosom friend – and thus it is up to Silas Craig, who once bought Cora’s enslaved mother from her father, to expose the “painful mystery” of Cora’s origins once she’s back in America (10).¹² As she learns that “the secret of her life” is that she is the child of her father and the enslaved Francilia, the narrator notes that “one drop of the blood of a slave ran in her veins, ... and stamped her with the curse of Cain” (68). The mark (or stamp) of Cain, widely used in tragic octoroon narratives to indicate slave ancestry, is a particularly mysterious thing, and can be found circulating in many city *Mysteries* novels in ways that emphasise the trickiness of signs. To be marked like Cain in the *Mysteries* is usually to bear a stamp either of slave lineage or sexual/social unruliness (for instance, it is used to describe prostitutes and former convicts), but it is also, paradoxically, to be *marked unrecognisably*: despite an occasional insistence that some people, sometimes, can discern the “fatal signs” of Cain’s mark, it is a mark that is invariably unstable and generally invisible. In this way, the mark of Cain encapsulates a particular and peculiar foundational paradox of the *Mysteries*: the genre’s yoking together of master perception and master deception, its insistence that signs are *always* present to be read by someone in some way, and yet also that the modern world is far too confusing and opaque a place to allow anyone to ever see clearly.

As Cora is discovering the mystery of her maternal parentage, Braddon introduces a new set of characters and plots by way of the Moraquitos family: Don Juan Moraquitos, his daughter Camillia, her governess Pauline, and the enslaved people who cared for Camillia in her infancy, Pepita, Zarah, and Zarah’s son Tristan. Don Juan is visited by his dying brother-in-law, Thomas Crivelli, who brings into the family another child of mystery, Paul Lisimon, (“none knew whence he came, or who he was” [38]). We eventually learn that Paul is another character with an enslaved mother, and who thus also bears the mark of Cain. Paul, however, enters the narrative *not* as an octoroon but rather as a *Mysteries* character, a version of Germain from Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*: both Germain and Paul are clever young men of unknown parentage who manage to work their way up in the world, in part by clerking for their novels’ lawyer-villains. As Paul and Camillia fall in love, Paul’s studies and clerking experience makes him aware of the city’s iniquities (indeed, he explicitly notes that “the experience of Silas Craig’s office has taught me many iniquitous secrets” [65]), and prepares him to react proactively when another suitor of Camillia (the villainous Augustus Horton) hires Silas to frame him for theft so as to clear the way to Camillia and her fortune.

Although Paul manages to escape imprisonment after Silas puts the plot to frame him into action, he remains exiled from Camillia and New Orleans until another character, who knows far more about city mysteries than he, decides to come to the rescue. This is Pauline Corsi, the novel’s embodiment of the *Mysteries* genre, who has seemingly stepped out of the pages of Sue’s Parisian novel. When her student-turned-companion Camillia observes at one point “Pauline! ... you are an enigma,” Pauline queries Camillia in reply:

¹² In America, the only other character to recognise Cora’s mixed-race identity before it is exposed by Silas Craig is Myra, an enslaved woman.

Have you ever heard, Camillia Moraquitos, of the secrets of Paris? Have you ever heard of the mysteries of that wonderful city, in which almost every street has its secret known only to the initiated in the winding ways of civilised life?

(157-8)

In the first half of Braddon's "tale of mystery and crime," as the narrator deems *The Octoroon*, Pauline is an embodiment of the sharp-eyed scheming and secret-holding of the *Mysteries* (64). In instalment six (in a chapter explicitly titled "Pauline Corsi Offers to Reveal a Secret"), she tries to get Paul to agree to marry her in exchange for her secret knowledge about him. When Paul, however, proves loyal to Camillia and turns her down, Pauline announces: "I am no love-sick girl, but an ambitious woman, with a brain to scheme and plot a glorious future," and she warns that Paul might "perish in ignorance of the mighty secret which I have kept for thirteen patient years, and which will be a fortune to me, if not to you" (88). After Paul's refusal, Pauline sets her sights on her employer Don Juan, and this time manages successfully, by way of blackmail, to get an offer of marriage. As she begins her campaign, Don Juan abruptly realises the governess's abilities at master-deception:

For some moment the gaze of Don Juan was rooted upon that fair face and those clear and radiant blue eyes – a face which was almost childlike in its delicacy and freshness, and which yet, to the experienced eye of the physiognomist, revealed a nature rarely matched for intelligence and cunning.

(103)¹³

When, convinced that Pauline only could have gained her secret knowledge by way of "some diabolical agency," Don Juan asks why she is suddenly now using it, Pauline replies: "I am tired of dependence" and demands to "share the wealth acquired by the guilt of whose secrets I know" (105).

Having succeeded in her scheming right at the half-way point of the novel, however, Pauline suddenly changes course, and offers to turn detective in order to help Camillia and Paul. Admitting to Camillia that only "three days ago I should have been capable of [hurting you], because I am ambitious," Pauline observes that "another road has opened to me, and henceforth, Camillia Moraquitos, I will be your friend" (125). After ascertaining Camillia's unwavering regard for Paul, she asks "what if the foul plot [to frame Paul], which, as I believe, has been hatched by that villainous attorney, Silas Craig, were brought to light by my agency?" (126). Camillia, though she tells Pauline "you terrify me," agrees to let her help (125). The novel accounts for the governess's mercurial impulses by noting that "there was a power for good or evil [in Pauline Corsi] – terrible, incalculable, if employed for the latter – the power of a great intellect and an unyielding will" (157). Braddon also gives Pauline a complex backstory that illuminates the kind of "wrongs that can transform an angel to a fiend": it turns out Pauline, like Cora and Paul, is also a child of mysterious parentage, brought up as the daughter

¹³ This description is one of many that reveal Pauline Corsi to be a prototype for Lady Audley. Both characters are governesses; both have a girlish appearance and feathery blonde hair (Pauline "was very fair, with large, limpid blue eyes, and a wealth of showery flaxen curls" and she is "small and slender, with delicate little feet and hands" [63]); both seem initially to be "thing[s] of sunshine and gladness" (despite subtle indications they might also be clever "schemer[s]" [64]); and both declare themselves friendless orphans.

of an Italian Duke but actually the daughter of a Parisian servant – and when this is discovered, the Duke renounces her. After she is turned out by the Duke, Pauline spends all her remaining resources to try to find her portrait-painter lover (who had left for America in despair over his love for a Duke’s daughter) and ends up penniless in New Orleans.¹⁴

As her search for her artist-lover indicates, Pauline has the instincts of a sleuth, and she is well able to divine “secret clew[s]” as “a depth of penetration lurked beneath [her] girlish exterior” (80). In the end, as the only character in the novel who combines the cunning to scheme like a *Mysteries* master plotter with the detective ability to foil others’ plots, it is up to Pauline to take down Silas Craig. Pauline performs her own version of social magic by forcing Silas Craig both to clear Paul of wrongdoing – she makes him place exonerating advertisements in “every paper printed in New Orleans” – and to produce a will the lawyer had been suppressing that, in revealing Paul’s identity (like Cora, he is the child of a wealthy man and an enslaved woman), establishes his substantial inheritance, clearing the way for Paul and Camillia’s marriage (172). Silas Craig bows to the governess’s power, recognising that “the strength of her indomitable will had a magnetic power over him” as Pauline sets into motion the exposures which will establish the lawyer as “a cheat and a swindler” (170, 201). Indeed, after his interview with her, Silas Craig realises that “the whole scaffolding of his life had fallen away, leaving him well-nigh crushed amongst the ruins” (187). Pauline Corsi’s championing of Paul, and her active facilitation of his and Camillia’s interracial marriage, seem to extend also to the novel’s reversal of Cora’s tragic trajectory. After being sold to the nefarious Augustus Horton, Cora is handily rescued by her white English engineer lover Gilbert Margrave and her repentant father, and Cora and Gilbert are also happily on their way to be married by the conclusion of the novel. Braddon thus uses the urban *Mysteries* and its master-perceiving and deceiving characters to frame the novel’s “radical ... vision of eventual social equality,” as Kimberly Harrison puts it (2006: 213).

All three of Braddon’s first penny novels show us a central mechanism by which the mystery genre moves from the chaotic, unruly *Mysteries* narrative to the tighter, more single-stranded detective story. The development of detective fiction out of the urban *Mysteries* in part depends on the master-plotters of the genre turning into more singular antagonists – into something more focused for the emerging detective figure to detect. Braddon’s personifications of the *Mysteries* provide a narrowing of the genre necessary to develop the detective character as likewise a more singular, special species of character. They also show us the radical nature of the early literary detective, who is a figure of the social margins – who is disabled, like Joseph Peters; or a mere clerk, like Joshua Slythe; or a dependent governess, like Pauline Corsi – and whose detective actions result in greater social equity. Braddon’s detectives are all miracle-workers of a kind, as Paul explicitly notes when he asks Pauline at the end of *The Octoroon*: “tell me in Heaven’s name – how did you work so great a miracle?” as to exonerate him and expedite his marriage with Camillia (Braddon [1861-2] n.d.: 186). While to this, Pauline smoothly replies: “when a woman has a powerful will, there is scarcely anything she cannot accomplish,” Braddon makes clear that Pauline’s powers result from the ways her powerful women’s will informs her detective abilities (186). Braddon’s early detectives astonish characters and readers alike with their magical skill in challenging social stratification and advancing social equity in “the winding ways of civilised life.”

¹⁴ In a happy twist at the novel’s end, Pauline’s eagle eye discovers her artist lover sauntering the city’s streets – he has come to New Orleans for a visit – and they reunite.

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